

“I’d include you if I could: How is the digital transformation a historical chance for women and social inclusion at large in the Middle East?”

An article by Bassant Helmi, Co-Chair of DAN

When we launched the Digital Arabia Network in January 2018 in Beirut, we had gathered around 40 experts from Morocco to Lebanon to discuss digital transformation and gender equality in the MENA. The room was brimming with energy and high-caliber experts. Most of them, women and men, live in the Middle East and North Africa and others are part of its diaspora. It is humbling to witness such incredible startups, civil society organisers, and social scientists make a dent in the digital world despite their low internet connectivity and low visibility on international podiums.

As we moved along constructing [our holistic approach to digital transformation](#) and gender equality, I realised we needed to grow the debate from mere diversity and gender representativeness to real inclusion, not only of women but of all social groups at all. If artificial intelligence translates our real world to the fast-paced digital sphere, we ought to pay closer attention to how it translates all the gender inequalities persisting in the offline world to our screens and daily technologies at speed and at scale. And as such, no need for long conversations. We already know it all about social, economic, and gender inequalities already. We now need action to counteract and prevent the consequences of women exclusion in the technology sector as [the UNESCO report I’d blush](#) if I could report has extensively demonstrated.

Gender inclusion is, all the more, a pressing scope for action when we know that Siri’s Apple, Alexa’s Google, Salma’s Mawdoo3 and other female-voiced virtual assistants hold a central longterm place in many households to which children are exposed to. While many may think it is too late, I am more on the optimistic spectrum. While launching coding programmes for girls and betting on startups to drive gender equality and digital transformation are a consciousness-pills to many, I am all in for deeper work on freeing the digital transformation from gender inequalities and prejudices against women. This is a historical chance to include women for wider social change and redefine the kind of societies we want to leave to the next generation.

We first need to redefine the actors and beneficiaries of such technologies. For the past decades, digital transformation was confined to the realm of millennial multimillion-making startups. For us, a digital actor is any individual or institution which uses, analyses, and investigates digital technology. In the past month, the involvement of Lebanese civil societies in the aftermath of the Beirut explosion. Open Map Lebanon, a rescue assistance technology, is one of the examples of how simple technology with everyday citizens can make a whole difference and in this case, save lives.

We then ought to move beyond quota numbers and incomplete statistics of women representativeness in the workforce and address heavier social issues they face. If 1/3 of startup founders in the Middle East are women, they still face enormous challenges in raising

funds from investors. Same goes for statistics of female participation in the workforce; which only reflects the private formal sectors and leaves behind the vast majority of the women's workforce in the informal sector - most often vulnerable sole breadwinners. Many of these, even if illiterate, still use and cope with technologies for daily commercial activities.

Perhaps too, this whole COVID19 accelerated digital transformation can help many employers and corporations review their organisational behaviour management strategies to allow not only flexible but also hybrid working models for women - and for the matter - other genders. The conversation has to move beyond "working from home" and focus on the technologies and digital literacy we offer women as opportunities for growth as well as the culture of trust in the employee-employer relationship in the workplace. And again, this whole distance working should not suddenly be an opportunity to exclude women out of the decision-making circle; more than they already are.

On a more human rights front, digital transformation needs also to move beyond luxurious conversations about expensive internet-of-things' devices. Inclusion also means that we need to hold conversations about open source, open data, digital privacy and data rights on the precious aspects of our digital identity as well as cybercrimes against women. When these topics become relatable and understandable by less literate women and other less economically privileged digital actors in society; we may finally give a chance to become the greater equaliser for all inclusion.

Contrary to popular belief, technology is definitely not the last battlefield for gender equality nor social inclusion at large when all of the realities mentioned above are still the privilege of a few well-educated, well-banked, and well-connected individuals. The real battle, if battle there is, has to happen on the ground in the real world with relentless awareness and advocacy to the challenges encountered by all. Such battles are better won by institutional and professional partnerships either between constituents of different countries within the same region and globally or by including the cohorts of social scientists such as politicians, anthropologists, and historians who all have a huge role to play in democratically including women and societies at large.

We may hope then that the many hypersexualised and objectified female body images among the male-dominated programmers communities never existed in the first place. We may also experience less backlash when we point out the lack of women representation on international panels. The safe existence of women and other socially vulnerable groups happens when they cease the very tools that define and exclude them in the online world. The conversation has already started on a global level. We need to make sure it keeps addressing these tools and their - hopefully - new masters.